

The Influence of the Mexican Muralists in the United States.

From the New Deal to the Abstract Expressionism

Leticia Alvarez

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Jacqueline Bixler, Chair

Bailey Van Hook

Justo Ulloa

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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis proposes to investigate the influence of the Mexican muralists in the United States, from the Depression to the Cold War. This thesis begins with the origins of the Mexican mural movement, which will provide the background to understand the artists' ideologies and their relationship and conflicts with the Mexican government. Then, I will discuss the presence of Mexican artists in the United States, their repercussions, and the interaction between censorship and freedom of expression as well as the controversies that arose from their murals.

This thesis will explore the influence that the Mexican mural movement had in the United States in the creation of a government-sponsored program for the arts (The New Deal, Works Progress Administration). During the 1930s, sociological factors caused that not only the art, but also the political ideologies of the Mexican artists to spread across the United States. The Depression provided the environment for a public art of social content, as well as a context that allowed some American artists to accept and follow the Marxist ideologies of the Mexican artists. This influence of radical politics will be also described.

Later, I will examine the repercussions of the Mexican artists' work on the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940s. Finally I will also examine the iconography of certain murals by Mexican and American artists to appreciate the reaction of their audience, their acceptance among a circle of artists, and the historical context that allowed those murals to be created.

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INTRODUCTION

The muralism movement led by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros had a great impact on Mexican art from the 1920s to the 1940s. On the one hand, the Mexican artists created a new tradition in modern art by implementing the old fresco techniques applied by the masters of the Italian Renaissance. On the other hand, they presented through their art the history of Mexico from the Spanish Conquest through the Mexican Revolution, and by doing so they re-discovered Mexico. For most Mexicans, muralism is more than an icon in their history. Octavio Paz mentions that the Mexican muralists have become *santones* (saints): “La gente mira sus pinturas como los devotos miran las imágenes sagradas.”¹ However, both Mexican and American art historians have largely ignored the repercussion that Mexican muralism had in the international arena.² Paz emphasizes the importance of the Mexican mural movement on American artists before and after World War II, as well as the lack of studies about this subject from either Mexican or American critics. Indeed, he mentions that “. . . es revelador que los críticos nacionalistas y ‘progresistas’ nunca hayan reparado en la significación de la influencia de Rivera, Orozco y Siqueiros en la pintura norteamericana al comenzar la década de los treinta.”³ Jonathan Harris also mentions the lack of attention to this subject from art historians. He comments that most American art critics

¹ “People look at their paintings as a devout looks at a sacred image.” Octavio Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista. Arte de México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), 201.

² Paz comments in his art essays that “A chapter is waiting to be written on the influence of the Mexican painters on American artists before the latter embraced ‘Abstract Expressionism,’” 57.

prefer to see the beginning of modern art in the late 1940s. Harris explains: “Most books on twentieth-century American art either largely ignore the Depression or include eulogies to only one or two artists.”⁴ These artists are usually the painters Edward Hopper and Stuart Davis, who do not represent the social ideas of the New Deal.

This thesis proposes to investigate the influence of the Mexican muralists in the United States. The idea of “influence” requires an explanation of what we mean when we talk about this concept. According to Francis V. O’Connor, influence today means: “. . . an inflowing of some sort from one entity to another.”⁵ O’Connor explains, according to this definition, that an influence could be (in aesthetic terms) the imitation of one artist or artistic style, which would only be one type of limited influence. Another way of being influenced is when an artist “idealizes the precursor.” This admiration could be seen, not only in the artistic values, but also in ideologies. This influence is manifested not as a copy of the artist’s work, but on the level of the social persona (the artist’s personality, ideas, etc.) The last type of influence and also the most creative is seen when a “strong artist misreads another artist” in search of their own visual language. O’Connor explains that “. . . the strength of the strong artist lies in his or her ability . . . to face down the precursor’s apparent omniscience . . . with the succeeding strong artist’s sense of self as an image-maker.”⁶

³ “It is revealing that critics, nationalists and ‘progressive,’ never notice the significance of the influence of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros in modern North American painting during the decade of the 1930s.”

⁴ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture. The Politics of Identity in the New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), i.

⁵ Francis V. O’Connor, “The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States during the 1930s and After,” in Cynthia Newman Helms, *Diego Rivera. A Retrospective* (Detroit: Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts in Association with W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 157.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

This thesis will consider these three types of influences, looking at the inflowing between artists, politics, and countries during a very unique epoch: the Depression.

O'Connor explains that in order for influence to take place several factors should justify it. During the 1930s, sociological factors caused not only the art, but also the political ideologies of the Mexican artists to spread across the United States. The Depression provided the environment for a public art of social content, as well as a context that allowed some American artists to accept and follow the Marxist ideologies of the Mexican artists.⁷

First, I look at the origins of the Mexican mural movement, which will provide the background to understand the artists' ideologies and their relationship and conflicts with the Mexican government. Then, I will discuss the presence of Mexican artists in the United States, their repercussions, and the relationship between censorship and freedom of expression as well as the controversies that arose from their murals. Also, I will explore the influence that the Mexican mural movement had in the United States in the creation of a government-sponsored program for the arts (The New Deal, Works Progress Administration). I will also describe the influence that the radical politics and ideologies of the Mexican artists had on American artists during the decade of the 1930s. Later, I will examine the repercussions of the Mexican artists' work on the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940s. Finally I will also examine the iconography of certain murals by Mexican and American artists to appreciate the reaction of their audience, their acceptance among a circle of artists, and the historical context that allowed those murals

⁷ Marxist ideas prompted the Mexican artists' painting for the people, which provided the precedent for

to be created. In addition to iconography, I rely on newspapers, magazines, and memoirs of American and Mexican artists and administrators of the Works Progress Administration.

what was called “people’s art.”

Chapter 1. The Roots of the Mexican Mural Movement

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 was the final result of thirty-four years of political dictatorship. The Mexican people rose to rebel against Porfirio Díaz's authoritarian regime and to struggle for their rights. After ten years of bloodshed and economic instability, Alvaro Obregón's presidency, from 1920 to 1924, led the country to political consolidation. Obregón and his Cabinet members, especially intellectual José Vasconcelos (Secretary of Public Education), promoted a massive propaganda campaign. Together they fostered a vision of a government that would take care of its citizens, educate them, raise their standard of living, open the world of political opportunity to the middle class, distribute land to the peasants and relieve the urban worker from centuries of oppression.⁸ As part of this campaign, Vasconcelos encouraged his countrymen to re-discover their own roots and native culture.

Whereas Díaz's government had tried to hide indigenous traditions by exalting French art and culture, Obregón encouraged nationalism by repudiating the notion that things foreign were superior. In addition, he revived the popular arts and customs of *el pueblo*.⁹ The idea was to introduce a cultural nationalism that would create a public consciousness of indigenous culture and at the same time serve as an educational model

⁸ Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940. Art of the New Order* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

⁹ Alvaro Obregón's idea was to foster national identity within *el pueblo*, constituted by the *mestizos* who were the prototype of the Mexican "race," the product of the fusion between two cultures: Spanish and Indian.

for the Indian population to help guide them through the modernization process. In order to fulfill this project, Obregón and Vasconcelos created the idea of an art for the masses.

Vasconcelos contacted the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, who had been studying art in Paris for ten years, under a government scholarship. Vasconcelos proposed to Rivera the idea of mural paintings sponsored by Obregón's government, and brought him back to Mexico in July 1921. At the same time, another Mexican artist who was studying in Spain published an important document that followed the same ideas pursued by Vasconcelos. That artist was David Alfaro Siqueiros and the document was *El manifiesto a los plásticos de América* published in May 1921, in the magazine *Vida Americana*. Siqueiros's idea was to look at Mexico's prehispanic past and to follow its traditions. He returned to Mexico in September 1922 and joined the mural project proposed by Vasconcelos.

Meanwhile, José Clemente Orozco was living in Coyoacán, Mexico City, and was working as an artist and a professor of drawing at the National School of Fine Arts. Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros were going to become known as *los tres grandes*, "the big three," and together they established a new era for the arts, which was called "the Mexican Mural Renaissance."

While mural historiography has asserted that Mexican muralism was "the child of the Mexican Revolution," it is important to know that the first mural commissions granted by Vasconcelos to Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros had a different character. Nicola Coleby has argued that the first murals were not manifestations of an artistic rupture, but rather the gradual evolution of cultural concepts that later become associated

with the movement.¹⁰ During the first years, from 1921 to 1924, Mexican mural painting had neither the revolutionary ideology nor the preoccupation with Mexican social problems that are now its most well-known features. Vasconcelos wanted the artists to produce a rich, high art that would regenerate and exalt the national spirit.¹¹ Rivera expressed this national spirit in his first mural commission, *La Creación*, which is an allegorical representation of the union between humanity and the universe, emphasizing the process of *mestizaje* that Mexico had undergone. Rivera seemed to be influenced by Vasconcelos' ideology of *la raza cósmica*,¹² "The Cosmic Race," . . . which proposes a symbiosis of American peoples and cultures, presenting in this way Indians along with *mestizos*, *criollos* and Spaniards. This mural is also noteworthy because its technique maintains the Cubist tradition with which Rivera had experimented in Paris.

Rivera's *Creation* presents at the bottom of each side of the mural a woman and a man, both naked. These characters represent the indigenous Mexican population. They appear naked as a symbol of their lack of culture and education. They look upon the figures that rise above them to learn from them, for they are clothed and cultured. In this representation, Vasconcelos' ideologies are evident. His belief was that: ". . . the inferior races, once educated, will become less prolific, and the better specimens will ascend on a scale of ethnic improvement."¹³ These characters represent the arts: dance, music, drama,

¹⁰ Nicola Coleby, "El temprano muralismo posrevolucionario: ¿Ruptura o continuidad?" in *Memoria. Congreso Internacional del Muralismo. San Idelfonso, cuna del muralismo mexicano: reflexiones historiográficas y artísticas* (México: CONACULTA, 1998), 13.

¹¹ *Boletín de la SEP* (México: agosto 1920): 27.

¹² Vasconcelos published his book, *La raza cósmica*, in 1925. In it he emphasizes the spiritualism of the Latin American race inherited by cultural symbiosis.

¹³ José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana: Argentina y Brazil*, 8th ed. (Mexico City: Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1948), 42-43. My translation.

etc. They appear not only to depict the culture, but also the different races of Mexico. Rivera used recognizable models (actresses, singers, etc.) to emphasize the idea of existential improvement through art and culture. Religion also plays an important role by offering three virtues of theology, faith, hope and charity. Love and knowledge are also represented on the top of the mural as angels. On the top-central part of the mural, a semi-circle presents three hands, which symbolizes the holy trinity, pointing at different directions. The man in the center representing Jesus, is extending his arms towards humanity. On each side of his body the evangelists are represented with their traditional attributes: a lion, an angel, a bull and an eagle. Through these allegories, Rivera expresses the concept of art and religion as tools that help to unify humanity and the universe. Rivera explained in 1922 that the arts and virtues are the mediums of knowledge and sentiment that make us come to the “pure rhythm, the last step.”¹⁴

The evolution of the Mexican mural reached another level with the creation of El Sindicato de Pintores y Escultores in 1923 and the resignation of Vasconcelos as Minister of Public Education in July 1924. Jean Charlot, a muralist working in Mexico at that time, commented that Vasconcelos’ resignation was due to the fact that he felt that the painters had gotten out of hand and refused to work in the line of pure art that he had requested. Instead, the painters were lifting the masses with their murals, expressing their political ideas.¹⁵ There was also another important incident that prompted him to resign. The students of the preparatory school protested constantly, questioning, “Where is the

¹⁴ Coleby, *Memoria*, 30.

¹⁵ Jean Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance, 1920-1925* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 296.

beauty of these paintings?” for they considered them “monstrosities.”¹⁶ They attacked the frescoes, principally those murals made by Siqueiros and Orozco (Rivera’s mural was inside the Auditorium). Vasconcelos ordered that whoever had defaced the paintings was to be expelled from school. He appeared before the students to assert his authority, but the students received him with cries of “Down with Vasconcelos! Lynch him! Down with the tyrant!”¹⁷ The violence increased, as Orozco comments in his autobiography: “. . . students in the preparatory school did not take kindly to the paintings. . . Ignacio Asúnsulo [a sculptor working at the time on the walls], came one morning to the Preparatoria . . . shooting a .45 revolver into the air, emptying three gun belts to the students who resisted beauty.”¹⁸ Orozco also mentions the day-by-day situation that they had to live while working on their murals: “Siqueiros and I were driven out by the students, who badly defaced our pictures with their sticks and knives and the stones they threw.”¹⁹

By July 1924, shortly before his departure, Vasconcelos decreed that the pictorial decorations be stopped. Later that year, Plutarco Elías Calles came to power and gave Vasconcelos’ position as Minister of Education to Dr. J.M. Puig Casauranc. The government stopped sponsoring mural commissions, but Rivera survived the public protest and was assigned to continue with his work.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 284.

¹⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁸ José Clemente Orozco, *José Clemente Orozco. An Autobiography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), 116-118.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida. The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 16.

During Calles' administration, relations with the Soviet Union were reestablished and the United States press started to talk about Mexican Bolchevization. On March 15, 1924, the first issue of *El Machete* appeared, a journal edited by Siqueiros with the help of Rivera and Orozco as columnists and illustrators. The journal, named after the curved blade that the Mexicans use to work and to fight, carried more illustrations than news. Siqueiros' wife, Graciela Amador, wrote the slogan, which states:

“El machete sirve para cortar la caña,
para abrir las veredas en los bosques umbríos,
para decapitar culebras, tronchar la cizaña,
y humillar la soberbia de los ricos impíos.”²¹

El Machete was affiliated with El Sindicato de Pintores and at the same time served as communist propaganda directed at the workers. It is important to emphasize that the idea of calling the artists' association “syndicate” reveals the new socialized attitude of the Mexican artists, for they conceived themselves as “cultural workers” rather than elitist artists.²²

Siqueiros wrote the manifesto for the union. In it he indicated that artists are workers who need to have active political participation and that the goal of each artist is to construct a new art with a social function. As Barry Carr explains, “The painters were

²¹ Translated by Jean Charlot, in *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, 245.

“The machete is used to reap cane,
to clear a path through an underbrush,
to kill snakes, end strife,
and to humble the pride of the impious rich.”

²² Shifra Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3.

also committed to be anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, in favor of collective work and keen to link their creative work to the needs of an evolving revolutionary society.”²³

A few particularly relevant fragments of the manifesto express not only the leftist inclination of the artists, but also the tenets followed by the Mexican mural movement:

The Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors to the native races humiliated through centuries; to the soldiers made executioners by their chiefs; to the workmen and peasants flogged by the rich; to the intellectuals not fawners of the bourgeoisie...

...THE ART OF THE MEXICAN PEOPLE IS THE GREATEST AND MOST HEALTHY SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION IN THE WORLD (and its) tradition our greatest possession. It is great because, being of the people, it is collective, and that is why our fundamental aesthetic goal is to socialize artistic expression, and tend to obliterate totally, individualism, which is bourgeois.

We repudiate the so-called easel painting and all the art of ultra-intellectual circles because it is aristocratic, we glorify the expression of Monumental Art because it is a public possession.

We PROCLAIM that since this social moment is one of transition between a decrepit order and a new one, the creators of beauty must put forth their utmost efforts to make their production of ideological value to the people, and the goal of

²³ Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 36.

art, which now is an expression of individualistic masturbation, should be one of beauty for all, of education and of battle.²⁴

The basic ideas of this manifesto would later be evident in the mural paintings, especially those of Rivera. Rivera tried to elevate and glorify through his paintings the great indigenous heritage of Mexico, which had been suppressed and denigrated since the sixteenth century, by giving to the indigenous population the power to reconstruct the present and to control the future.

Orozco, on the other hand, did not attempt to represent the underdeveloped classes as an example of *lo mexicano*. He severely criticized the custom of promoting *la mexicanidad* as the purest expression of Mexico. For him, the way that city people looked at the Indian humiliated further their condition. He asked the government, “Why does the most vulgar and ridiculous expression of a social class need to belong to an entire nation?” Then he answered them: “. . . for this reason I renounce now and forever to paint sandals and dirty underwear. I wish, with all my heart, that those people who wear them will abandon them and civilize themselves, but I do not glorify them. . .”²⁵

Orozco was against “official art” and therefore decided to paint his own version of history. While his favorite historical themes would be very similar to those of the other muralists --the Mexican Revolution and the Conquest of Mexico--, his version would be very different. On the one hand, Diego Rivera reconstructed the past and created a utopia of the conquest from an optimistic perspective. Orozco, on the other

²⁴ Quotation from Goldman, *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*, as translated by Anita Brenner, 3.

²⁵ Quotation taken from Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico*, 56.

hand, offered a more balanced account of the struggles between Spaniards and Aztecs. For him, true nationalism could not reside in a “. . . theatrical wardrobe. . . but rather in our scientific, industrial, or artistic contribution to civilization at large.”²⁶ Octavio Paz mentions this difference as he points out that the Cortés of Orozco is not the same Cortés that Rivera represented as weak and deformed. Orozco represented Cortés as a strong man made of stone, naked, side by side with a naked Indian woman, La Malinche.²⁷ These two important personages in the history of Mexico are represented to emphasize a new Mexico, not only the mixture of races, but also the oppression of the Indian class; under Cortés’ feet appears the figure of a dead Indian.²⁸ But the image is ambiguous, for Cortés, with his strong gesture and his hand crossing Malinche’s body, is either preventing Malinche from providing assistance to the Indian or separating her from her former life. Even though in either case he limits her, the handshake appears to concretize an agreement that they had as a couple and also as partners during the Conquest.

The art of the Mexican muralists started to change by the mid 1920s. The content of their murals began to involve radical politics. In this second stage, the most notable aspect of the Mexican mural paintings is the presence of communist propaganda. Siqueiros became a member of the Communist Party in 1924. Of the big three, he was the most politically engaged. Rivera also joined the Party, but his presence as a militant would be uneven.²⁹ As both artists got more involved in the communist movement, their

²⁶ Charlot, *The Mexican Mural Renaissance*, 227.

²⁷ Malinche served as interpreter and mistress of Hernan Cortés during the conquest.

²⁸ Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista*, 238.

²⁹ He became a member of the Party upon his arrival to Mexico, in 1922, resigning in 1924. He rejoined the Party in 1926 and was thrown out in 1929. He was reaccepted in 1954, right after Frida Kahlo’s death.

art changed as it became directed to the masses and carried echoes of communism. Paz commented that once Rivera had “converted” to communism, he repudiated his previous beliefs. On a wall of the building of the Secretaría de Educación Pública, for example, he painted a cartoon ridiculing Vasconcelos. Paz employs the popular Spanish refrain “*cría cuervos y te sacarán los ojos . . .*” to convey this apparent betrayal.³⁰ The art of the Mexican artists broke every link that could relate them with Vasconcelos’ ideologies. Instead of pure art, the term "social realism" was being utilized by this time to identify the Mexican mural paintings.³¹

It is relevant to discuss the changes that Mexican art went through during this second, more political period. The mural painting that at one moment was used to create and retain the historical myths of Mexico’s revolutionary leaders (Emiliano Zapata, Francisco I. Madero, Venustiano Carranza) was now trying to represent *el pueblo* by using an ideology, images, convictions and beliefs that were not representative of the Mexican people, but rather of Communism. Mural painting was still trying to be didactic, but at this point it was not relaying the state's ideas. Instead, the painters’ ideologies were dictating what their walls would promulgate. Octavio Paz explained that the relation between the painters and the state was at this point functional. The state wanted Mexican walls to be decorated by very famous artists. The painters were thus given spaces on Mexican buildings. In turn, they could express Communist propaganda. By accepting this relation, both groups fell into contradictions; the art of the state was

³⁰ This refrain is similar to the one used in the United States: “To bite the hand that feeds you.”

expressing ideas different from the state and Mexican artists were painting an art that was at the same time official and revolutionary.³²

For example, Rivera presents in his mural *Distributing Arms*, portraits of artists and political personages that were very active within the Communist Party. Frida Kahlo, Rivera's wife, appears in the center, leading the distribution of arms. Siqueiros, on the left, is wearing on his hat the red star that symbolizes the Communists. Tina Modotti also appears on the right with her lover, Cuban communist Julio Antonio Mella. The representation of Kahlo in the central part of the composition, leading the distribution of arms, represents the change in the role of women. Women of the Communist party were not going to be like the Mexican *soldaderas*, who participated during the Revolution only to serve their men; they would have a more active participation in the Communist Revolution. The mural also depicts Mexican peasants and workers, men, women and children that are joined together to attack the established order. A worker holding with one hand the Communist flag points with his other hand to the peasants, who are also carrying a flag that contains the ideas for which Zapata fought during the Revolution: *tierra y libertad* (land and freedom). This image suggests that the peasants and workers could only obtain what they wanted through Communist Revolution.

However, this artistic glorification of communism became problematic during the Presidency of Portes Gil, for in 1929, relations broke with the Soviet Union and the Mexican government started to persecute and repress the Communists. Siqueiros was

³¹ Octavio Paz comments in his *Re/Visiones: la pintura mural*, that nobody knows exactly what this term means. He considers that the Mexican murals are not realist, not even socialist, but rather the murals are allegorical paintings that use elemental Marxism to represent the struggles between progress and reaction.

deported from Mexico in 1932. But Rivera continued nonetheless to paint communist propaganda. Tina Modotti, an Italian communist photographer and one of the first artists to be exiled from Mexico, relates the government's claim of non-interference and tolerance: "The Reds say we are reactionaries, but look, we are letting Diego Rivera paint all the hammers and sickles he wants on public buildings."³³

Rivera's murals in El Palacio Nacional, present the history of Mexico as seen through the eyes of the painter. On the south wall, which is called "Mexico Today and Tomorrow," Rivera depicted a socialized Mexico, which is being led by Karl Marx's ideology. He portrayed Marx talking with a Mexican worker about a utopia that promises the abolition of social classes and private property. With one hand, Marx is pointing toward a better future; with his other hand he is holding a text that says: "All history of the human society until today is a history of class struggles . . . For us, it is not about transforming private property, but rather abolishing it. It is not about fading class differences, but destroying them. It is not about reforming the current society, but creating a new one."

Siqueiros saw his own communist beliefs a little differently. For him, revolutionary ideologies needed to harmonize with his artistic techniques. He thought of an artist as a worker looking upon the new era that they were living. The new modern era offered the technology and machinery that he associated with the future. Siqueiros' revolutionary art expressed strong revolutionary beliefs. For him, the ultimate goal was to produce a political art that would radicalize the viewer. Therefore, he thought that it

³² Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista*, 209.

was time for artistic techniques to change. He called for plastic experimentation, for new materials, and most of all for a new language that the masses could understand. For him, it was time to put an end to easel painting, which was considered aristocratic and usually belonged to private institutions, and time to start an art with more repercussion, an art for the people.

Mexican artists found in the United States the resources to expand their knowledge about technologies. By the late twenties, Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, had abandoned Mexico with the idea of promoting not only murals as public art, but also their artistic techniques and radical politics.

³³ Mildred Constantine, *Tina Modotti: A Fragile Life* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 151.

Chapter 2. Mexican Artists in the United States

The “Mexican art invasion” began in the mid-1920s and reached its peak in the early 1930s, when Orozco and Rivera executed their controversial murals in the United States. Although these artists soon returned to Mexico, their influence continued to be felt throughout the decade in the work of American muralists who had been inspired by their example.³⁴

By the middle of the 1920s the United States became aware of the successful artistic movement that was taking place in Mexico due to several publications and books that were issued at the time.³⁵ The interest in Mexican art and folklore grew and captured the interest of art critics. In October 1930, an art exhibition first shown in Mexico City traveled to New York. The twenty-four painters who presented their work include the muralists Orozco and Rivera, as well as *los formalistas* or apolitical artists Tamayo, Mérida and Rodríguez Lozano. The exhibition “Art in Mexico” was presented at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and included other sections that illustrated folk arts from the colonial period to the present. The catalog called this folk art “. . . the truest form of self expression of the Mexican people.” More than 25,000 saw the show, which subsequently traveled to thirteen other cities in the United States.³⁶

³⁴ Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican. Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), 126.

³⁵ Anita Brenner published in 1929, *Idols Behind Altars* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1967), including chapters about the beginnings of the mural movement and about the work done by Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco. Walter Pach includes Rivera in his book, *Masters of Modern Art* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), and published articles in the *Art Center Bulletin* in April 1926 and in *Creative Art* in January 1929. Bertram Wolfe also focuses on Rivera in his article published by *Nation* in August 27, 1924, “Art and Revolution in Mexico.”

³⁶ Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 144-145.

The presence of the Mexican artist in the U.S. is commonly called the “Mexican invasion” of American art. Orozco arrived in New York in 1927 but it was not until 1930 that he received his first mural commission. He went to California and produced his famous *Prometeo* at Pomona College in Claremont. Among the Mexican artists, Rivera was the most famous and also the one who received more mural commissions and larger exhibitions. Hurlburt explains that this was due not only to his artistic genius but also to his “. . . enormous skills in the arena of public relations.”³⁷ Diego Rivera’s career spread across the country from 1930 to 1933. Even though he was a self-proclaimed Marxist artist, he worked ironically for capitalist patrons. He arrived in San Francisco in November 1930. Soon after, the Stock Exchange Commission hired him to work on his *Allegory of California*. After the positive response to this mural, he was hired by Edsel Ford to work at the Institute of Arts in Detroit. The Detroit mural, called *Detroit Industry*, is considered Rivera’s masterwork in the United States. Rivera was able to depict not only the industrial process in the production and manufacture of automobiles, but he was also able to incorporate his fresco technique, along with his study of cubism and his knowledge of pre-Columbian art into the mural, making this work a complex study of historical artistic techniques. Rivera handles the space and the distribution of figures and machines by using geometrical divisions. The Mexican artist was also able to use the shape of pre-Columbian sculptures to communicate the enormous machinery. On

³⁷ Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 6-7.

the north wall, for example, “. . . the two rows of multiple spindles are adapted from ancient Aztec and Mayan sculptures representing deities.”³⁸

However, the mural provoked problems with the Catholic Church, because on the top right side of the north wall Rivera painted the scene of a child being vaccinated in a medical laboratory. Apparently, Rivera’s use of Italian art techniques and the compositional forms of this image were inspired by an old Italian painting of the Holy Family. For this reason it was considered irreverent. For example, the Rev. H. Ralph Higgins led protests against his work. Nonetheless, when 3,500 people visited the mural and more than 10,000 signatures were collected in favor of his work, Rivera won the battle and the mural stayed where it was.³⁹

Rivera formed strong relations with the highest levels of the bourgeoisie and the most influential people in the country as his fame spread throughout the United States. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and her friends helped him to organize his first one-man show at the recently inaugurated Museum of Modern Art, in December 1931. It was only the second one-person exhibition at the Museum. The attendance totaled 56,575, more than the first one dedicated to Matisse.⁴⁰

Siqueiros was the last to arrive, in 1932. He came to the United States, in contrast to Rivera and Orozco, as a political exile.⁴¹ He arrived in Los Angeles to teach at the Art School of Chouinard, where he painted three frescoes experimenting with new materials

³⁸ Helms, *Diego Rivera. A Retrospective*, 291.

³⁹ Irene Herner De Larrea, *Diego Rivera’s Mural at the Rockefeller Center* (México: Edicupes, S.A. de C.V, 1990), 43.

⁴⁰ Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 151.

such as the airbrush. In the most important panel, *America Tropical*, Siqueiros painted a crucified Indian, while on the right half are two *guerrilleros*, a Mexican *campesino* and a Peruvian Indian, all of whom appear as a threat to America. This fresco severely criticized American imperialism. At the top of the cross was an eagle, representing the United States as a controlling power and Latin America as the victim. It was destroyed right after he finished, first the parts that were visible from the street. Later on, the whole wall was covered at the demand of the building's owner, Mrs. Christine Sterling, "who allegedly hated the 'ugly' painting."⁴² Siqueiros was deported the same year that he arrived, in November 1932, because of the strident leftist message of his murals and the political criticism to the United States government.⁴³

Orozco also created controversy with his mural *The Epic of American Civilization*, painted at Dartmouth College between 1932 and 1934. Although several critics were uncomfortable with the mural, whose theme was Mexico's pre-Columbian civilization, most of the attacks were against the institution that gave the foreign artist the commission. The journalist Hugh R. O'Neill fiercely defended Orozco by saying that "it is better to have one powerful painting on this continent made by a Mexican, Spaniard, Oriental, or African, than a thousand mediocrities made by Americans."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Siqueiros had become a full time revolutionary union organizer; he spent most of 1930 in jail in the Mexico City Penitentiary.

⁴² Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralist in the United States*, 213.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Art Digest* (October 15, 1934): 8-10.

Among the big three, Rivera was the one who created the most controversial Mexican mural in the U.S., at the Rockefeller Center in 1933.⁴⁵ The Rockefellers imposed the theme and title for this mural: “Man at the Crossroads with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future,” while Rivera had to show “. . . human intelligence controlling the powers of nature.”⁴⁶ The mural depicted Lenin holding the hands of a white soldier and a black worker. On May 4, 1933, Rivera received a letter from Nelson A. Rockefeller in which he was ordered to erase the image of Lenin. The Rockefellers thought that this picture could be offensive to some people: “I noticed that in the most recent portion of the painting you had included a portrait of Lenin . . . As much as I dislike to do so, I am afraid we must ask you to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin’s face now appears.”⁴⁷ Rivera, in response, commented that Lenin’s face had appeared since the first sketches and that it was important because for him Lenin represented the greatest leader ever. He explained that “. . . rather than mutilate the conception, I should prefer the physical destruction of the conception in its entirety, but conserving, at least, its integrity.”⁴⁸

Although Rivera received a last letter with an attached check covering the balance for his work, he was dismissed from the commission. The mural was covered by a black canvas and later destroyed. American artists were indignant about it and accused the Rockefellers of “cultural vandalism.” The scandal of this episode in Rivera’s career

⁴⁵ His assistants for this mural were Arthur Niendorff, an American, and Andrés Sánchez Flores, a Mexican. Rivera also had five painting students: Dimitroff, Bulgarian; Hideo Noda, Japanese; Ben Shahn, born Russian; and Lou and Lucien Bloch, American.

⁴⁶ De Larrea, *Diego Rivera’s Mural at the Rockefeller Center*, 42.

caused him to lose a commission to paint in the General Motors building at the Century Progress exposition in Chicago. In spite of all this, Rivera decided to stay in New York and used the Rockefeller's payment to paint murals free of charge at the centers of communist militants in that city.⁴⁹ By doing this, Rivera was in part defending his reputation. He had been accused of being a Marxist surrounded by the wealthiest American people and receiving from them a large amount of money.

Francis V. O'Connor examines the presence and production of controversial Mexican artists in the United States. According to him, the Mexicans ". . . filled a cultural and ideological vacuum" at a time when few recognized artists of stature were on the scene.⁵⁰ Artists in the United States were receptive to Mexicans because they represented another option in art, for the American artists were already questioning the supremacy of European art. The writer Thomas Craven stated that finally they were going to put an end to "the curse of French trivialities." The painter Ben Shahn mentioned after his return from Paris, "I like stories and people. The French school is not for me."⁵¹ The American regionalist artist Thomas Hart Benton comments in his autobiography that he admired the Mexican artists and that he looked with envy on the opportunities that the Mexican government gave to the Mexican painters for public mural work.

⁴⁷"Rockefeller Boards Up Rivera Fresco Because Artist Will Not Substitute Face of Unknown Man for Lenin." *The Art News* (May 13, 1933): 3-4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ De Larrea, *Diego Rivera's Mural at the Rockefeller Center*, 45.

⁵⁰ Francis V. O'Connor, "The Influence of Diego Rivera on the Art of the United States during the 1930s and After," in Helms, *Diego Rivera. A Retrospective*, 159.

⁵¹ Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 22.

One of the most important figures in the growth of the mural movement in the United States was the artist George Biddle, who was confident that the federal government could cause a “real spurt in the arts.”⁵² On May 9, 1933, Biddle wrote a letter to his old Harvard classmate, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, urging him to initiate government patronage following the example of the Mexican muralists, to whom their own government offered walls, paint and, most important of all, artistic freedom. In his letter, Biddle wrote: “. . . the younger artists of America are conscious as they never have been of the social revolution that our country and civilizations are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in permanent art form if they were given the government’s cooperation.”⁵³

As a result, President Roosevelt included in the New Deal emergency program a project for the arts, first called the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) administered by Edward Bruce, who was a lawyer, businessman and professional painter. It lasted six months, from December 1933 to January 1934. But larger and more important was the Work Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project (WPA/FPA), created in 1935, which was the largest program dedicated to the arts. Holger Cahill, an art writer, museum curator, and the director of the WPA/FAP, said that two “powerful sources” gave form to this project: On the one hand John Dewey’s ideas of art as a way of communication, and on the other hand, the Mexican mural movement. Cahill’s idea that “. . . art should not be a luxury available to the rich – that art belonged to all peoples,” was not far from that of

⁵² Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 5.

⁵³ Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 8.

the Mexican artists.⁵⁴ He also stated that the Mexican mural program would help the United States to enrich its creative life by providing an example of an art with social meanings.⁵⁵ However, the creation of this program produced controversy because not everybody agreed that the Mexican movement was a model for the public art of the United States. Some critics argued that American architecture was not as suitable for murals as the Mexican classical buildings. Besides, they believed that education through art was less justifiable because the United States had a literate population and strong mass media.⁵⁶ But the artists were interested in this new art. Thomas Hart Benton compared his ideals with those of the Mexican artists. He stated that “. . . the Mexican concern with publicly significant meanings and with the pageant of Mexican national life corresponded perfectly with what I had in mind for art in the United States.”⁵⁷

Jonathan Harris observes that the mural paintings produced by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros in Mexico and the United States “. . . had come to signify the social and political function of art.”⁵⁸ Harris also mentioned Roosevelt’s ability to involve individuals and groups in recognizing themselves as loyal citizens of a nation. Roosevelt even tried to look for support in opposing groups, including the communist and socialist

⁵⁴ Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal*, 19.

⁵⁵ Francis V. O’Connor, *Art for the Millions. Essays from the 1930’s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (New York: New York Graphic Society LTD, 1973), 38.

⁵⁶ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *New Deal for Art. The Government Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City & State* (New York: The Gallery Association of New York State, 1977), 60.

⁵⁷ Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art. A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1969), 61.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Harris. *Federal Art and National Culture. The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35.

sympathizers inside and outside the Democratic Party. The Federal Art Project was an attempt to reconstruct society around the bases of citizenship.⁵⁹

For Cahill, the art that the American artists were to create was classified as fine art, but it had to be socially useful. Mural painting, since it was on a massive scale and located on public buildings, was obliged to have a social role. Cahill's ideas were not far from those of the Mexican politicians Obregón and Vasconcelos. He wanted to create an art that was most of all a representation of the United States and that at the same time served to unify the American people. Cahill believed that America was living a time of reevaluation and that a painting style with “. . . its emphasis on social and collective expressions, gave a fresh and vital interpretation to the American way of life.”⁶⁰

The American artist during the 1930s followed different artistic styles, whether American scene or regionalism (Thomas Hart Benton), social scene or expressionism (Ben Shahn), surrealism or abstraction (Arshile Gorky, Stuart Davis). Whatever style they followed, they were constantly communicating social meanings in their murals. In a dialogue established with Audrey McMahan, Olive Lyford Gavert, Marchal E. Landgren, Jacob Kainen, and Francis V. O'Connor, they discussed the importance of social reality in their murals. Landgren explains that the social scene was at that time a very vital scene. Different events that occurred during the Depression, particularly in the great metropolitan areas, such as the activities of the communists and the American League Against War and Fascism, brought social concerns to life in the artist. However, in the same dialogue, Audrey McMahan, who worked during the 1930s for the College Art

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

Association, recalled some questionnaires given to the artists at that time by the historian, Francis V. O'Connor. American artists were asked if they were required or requested to depict social reality, and they all answered negatively, except while they worked on the PWAP.⁶¹ The influence of Mexican art and its depiction of social ideals is also mentioned by Belisario Contreras, who explains that art showed people's determination to revive the American dream. Nonetheless, American artists created an art that ". . . reflected the social consciousness engendered by the Depression" and their most common themes ". . . expressed a commonplace sensibility, such as society on welfare, society at play, society working, and society sustained by the new idealism of the Roosevelt administration."⁶²

The New Deal also stimulated the development of new art galleries and museums. The Whitney Museum of American Art was created in 1930 in order to reinforce the idea of American art.⁶³ It was the first museum to admit a living artist into a permanent collection. However, during the 1930s, mural painting gained more audience. Ben Shahn, who assisted Diego Rivera at the Rockefeller Center, later mentioned in an interview with the *Magazine of Art*, in April 1944, that he preferred doing murals ". . . because more people see them than they do easel pictures." Benton also mentions that he prefers mural painting because they are of public possession, while easel painting goes to museums that nobody visits.

⁶⁰ Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal*, 23.

⁶¹ Francis V. O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects. An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 316-317.

⁶² Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal Art*, 25.

⁶³ Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney founded the museum in 1914 as the Whitney Studio Club. It was not until 1930 that the museum adopted its current name.

Mexican artists started a new tradition in American art. The artists not only learned from the Mexican artists the fresco technique and the ability to express everyday life with a contemporary language, but they also gained an audience. By making art public, the American citizens got closer to an art that was not only comprehensible to them, but also one with which they could identify.

Chapter 3. The Mexican Leftist Influence on American Mural Painters

. . . That Gargantuan Mexicano is the God of many American fresco painters, particularly of those who careen to larboard, so to speak. In their eagerness to follow in his brush strokes, they not only lean over toward the extreme left, but also backward. . .⁶⁴

The radical politics of Diego Rivera's murals had a strong impact on Californian artists. His San Francisco mural, *Making a Fresco*, not only provided the city with its first image for organized labor, but also highlighted as the principal protagonist of the mural the worker, “. . . who had never before been pictured.”⁶⁵ It offered for the first time a radical visual culture for the working classes. The mural's theme was the design and construction of a modern industrial city in the United States. The figure of the worker represented a “. . . technologically planned and worker-controlled industrial society.”⁶⁶ In this mural, Rivera included old Italian artistic traditions and religious conventionalism from the 13th century. The mural is a triangular triptych, which was traditionally used to evoke the mystery of the Trinity. The triptych is subdivided in eight parts, four on the central panel and two on each side. Rivera included, as is common in his art, portraits of recognizable characters, such as his assistants (John Viscout Hastings, Clifford Wight and Matthew Barnes), who appear at the top-central part of the mural. Rivera also includes in the mural, at the bottom-central part, the three men who commissioned him for the mural (William Gerstle, Arthur Brown, and Timothy

⁶⁴ Quotation taken from Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left. Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999), 144-145.

⁶⁵ Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 104.

Pfleuger).⁶⁷ The inclusion of donor portraits was another Renaissance convention. Rivera's vision of modernity is shown on the right panel. He presents in the background skyscrapers, an airplane and the workers building the city. Rivera even includes himself in the mural. As the painter in charge of the commission, he completely turns his back to the audience that criticizes the communist propaganda that Rivera had discretely included. On the blue denim pocket of the worker, Rivera placed a small hammer and sickle.

Anthony W. Lee mentions that the radical artists who worked with Rivera “. . . were attempting to find a visual vocabulary to support the new united agenda and gain the attention of the working classes.”⁶⁸ This new language demonstrates the leftist influence of Rivera on American artists. Some critics gave it a new name: Riveraesque, which stood for certain iconography representative of Rivera's art and technique, as well as for a visual style associated with the left.⁶⁹ The Riveraesque style was seen in the murals of the Coit Tower, in San Francisco. The Coit Tower panels represent “the leftist artists' most startling moment of activism and cohesion,” when their work could actually speak to the working class.⁷⁰ This project was commissioned by the PWAP and constituted the largest collective federal project in the United States. Herbert Fleishhacker was in charge of the founding of Coit Tower and determined the tower's links with the PAWP. Victor Arnautoff and Bernard Zakheim, two of the artists

⁶⁶ Helms, *Diego Rivera. A Retrospective*, 283.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶⁸ Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 104.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, XIX.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

commissioned for this project, considered themselves leftist artists and saw in this project the opportunity to express their political beliefs.

A month before the opening of the building, newspaper editors saw the radical murals for the first time while touring the building. One journalist wrote about the murals: “The Coit Tower had seen red, that is to say – let me whisper it, lest I be overheard—the naughty boys had indulged in a little Communistic propaganda at the expense of the U.S. Government.”⁷¹ The journalists not only expressed their annoyance at the leftists’ murals, but also criticized the artistic performance of the artists. Another observer commented, “If anything could be worse in color and proportion than the murals in the Coit Tower I’d like to see it. . . Bah! Destroy the present ones. The painters must be novices to display such eyesores. . . Bah! These give one a pain in the neck.”⁷²

The opening of the building was delayed. By June, Fleishhacker considered destroying the murals, finding the work of some painters unacceptable, indeed even dangerous. Zakheim’s mural, along with several others, was slated for whitewashing. Zakheim’s *Library* presents a portrait of members of the Communist Party, all gathered in a library: Kenneth Rexroth, the founder of the Artists’ and Writers’ Union, is on the ladder above, John Langley Howard is reaching for *Das Kapital*, Zakheim himself appears reading at the second table, and Zakheim’s assistant, Shirley Triest, is dressed as a boy.⁷³ The use of recognizable faces was considered Riveraesque and adopted by the painters of the Coit Tower. Zakheim also included a miner reading the *Western Worker*,

⁷¹ Ibid., 144-145.

⁷² Ibid., 158.

⁷³ Ibid., 157.

which was a communist weekly. There were also shocking headlines from newspapers, and Ralph Stackpole (a known leftist artist) is shown reading a paper with headlines announcing the destruction of Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural *Man at the Crossroads*. On July 9 Fleishhacker made a last appeal to Zakheim: "You know we are on the threshold of a war and we cannot tolerate what you have painted in the Coit Tower. Therefore if you want to play ball with us, you'll change (it)."⁷⁴ Zakheim responded that he was a "hammer and sickle painter," but despite his protests, the artist changed before the opening the headlines and book titles included in the murals.⁷⁵

Victor Arnautoff's *City Life* was another Coit Tower mural that created controversy due to its leftist content. This mural depicted the violence of a metropolitan city, particularly the events that take place on a crowded street. The left panel presents the social problems of a big city, including a well-dressed man being robbed, a car accident and the aggressive attitude of the drivers. The mural also contains signs of communist propaganda, such as a workman holding a red flag and a public newsstand containing radical publications such as *The New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, which denounce the problems of capitalist system.

The artist Clifford Wight, who was Rivera's assistant in the mural *The Making of a Fresco*, also experienced censorship. His mural was severely criticized by the artist Glenn Wessels and by Edward Bruce, the director of the PWAP. Wessels believed that artists had the right to express themselves but not with federal funding. Bruce responded to the artist in stronger terms: "I hope they don't fool around with this socialistic thing

⁷⁴ Ibid., 154.

any longer, and wipe the damn painting out of the tower!” Indeed, Wight had to remove the Soviet emblem from his mural.⁷⁶

California was not the only place that was influenced by Rivera’s political ideas. New York City also felt the presence of Diego Rivera, making this city another important place for artists involved with the Left. Ben Shahn was one of these artists. His participation as Rivera’s assistant in the destroyed mural at the Rockefeller Center influenced him to paint a consciously socialist art. He had learned the ramifications of painting politically charged art but nevertheless wanted to do so in his own murals.⁷⁷ Shahn learned from Rivera the use of the fresco to deal with contemporary problems, and as a Russian Jewish immigrant, he explored the situation of a minority: the Jewish presence in the American scene. In the mural *Jersey Homesteads*, he presents the history of East European Jewish immigration to the United States and the social conditions that they found in this new country. The mural is divided in three sections. The left-hand section portrays Jewish immigration to the United States. Shahn, like Rivera, uses portraits of recognizable historical figures along with his family and relatives (although they all arrived at different times and from different countries). Shahn depicts the artist Raphael Soyer as a grown man, even though he arrived as a teenager, and also presents the socialist engineer Charles Steinmetz, who arrived in 1889. The central figure is

⁷⁵ McKinzie, *The New Deal for the Artist*, 26.

⁷⁶ Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal*, 44.

⁷⁷ McKinzie, *The New Deal for the Artist*, 40.

Albert Einstein, who arrived from Germany, and renounced his German citizenship in 1933.⁷⁸

The figure of Einstein emphasizes the plight of the immigrant. In the upper left, Shahn includes a small figure of a Nazi soldier holding a text written in German which says: “Germans beware: don’t buy from Jews.” This scene alludes to the Nazi boycott of 1933. Behind this scene, two women lament together the deaths of the political martyrs Sacco and Vanzetti, while their corpses appear in open coffins. The history of the trial and death of these figures would be a source of inspiration for Shahn. Behind Einstein, a group of mostly men arrive to this new country, their faces showing the sorrow of abandoning their land and perhaps their families, (on the right side, behind the wall, women and children stay in desolation). As a sign of welcome, the flag of the United States is waving in front of a small figure of the Statue of Liberty.

Shahn represents in the central section of the mural the oppressive labor and living conditions encountered by many Jews, but he also suggests that their lives could get better through labor unions and the social programs of the New Deal. Shahn believed that it was important to establish a broader base for American Jews. Rather than emphasize ethnicity, he promoted class affiliation.⁷⁹ Through his mural, Shahn offered the new immigrants “. . . a direction that the Jewish American could follow, a path

⁷⁸ Susan Chevlowe, *Common Man Mythic Vision. The Paintings of Ben Shahn* (New York: The Jewish Museum and Princeton University Press, 1998), 48.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

historically rooted in socially progressive ideals and earlier Jewish utopian initiatives that complemented those of the New Deal and that stressed class and communal affiliation.”⁸⁰

Shahn commented in 1944 on an episode that occurred while he was painting the *Jersey Homesteads*. The service crew foreman spoke to him, asking, “You the guy who did these pictures?” He responded affirmatively, and asked him how he liked them. “Not particularly, but I’m sure glad you put these guys in overalls up on the walls. It helped me organize the building crew. Made ’em think they were important.”⁸¹ Through this episode we are able to see the reaction that Shahn’s murals prompted in the working classes, and how such comments kept Shahn focusing on the social problems of America.⁸² In 1933 Rivera himself claimed that Shahn had “. . . humanized the technical methods of the Paris painters,” in other words, of the School of Paris. In addition, Rivera felt that Shahn’s work “. . . appealed to the most sophisticated connoisseurs of art as well as . . . the masses of workers.”⁸³ Even President Roosevelt believed that the work of the American artist Ben Shahn showed a unique approach to the dominant Mexican style of social realism. President Roosevelt encouraged American artists to express the social consciousness and the ideals of the people.⁸⁴

Mexican artists influenced American artists through their murals but also by having them as assistants and students. Siqueiros resolved his difficulties with the United

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁸¹ Quotation taken from John D. Morse, *Ben Shahn* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), 62. Excerpt from “Ben Shahn: An Interview,” *Magazine of Art* (April 1944).

⁸² Shahn continued painting an art that criticizes society. During the forties, he explored the horrors of World War II and also depicted his experience of being an immigrant and American at the same time.

⁸³ Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn. New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate, 1947-1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 3.

⁸⁴ Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal*, 84.

States immigration authorities, and had returned to New York in 1934.⁸⁵ In 1936 Siqueiros had the opportunity to create in New York an experimental workshop called “A Laboratory of Modern Techniques in Art.” The Workshop was affiliated with the CPUSA (Communist Party of the United States). The members of the workshop were Jackson Pollock and his brother Sanford, Harold Lehman, Axel Horn, George Cox, Louis Ferstadt, Clara Mahl, the Mexicans Luis Arenal, Antonio Pujol, Conrado Vásquez, and José Gutiérrez, and the Bolivian Roberto Berdecio.⁸⁶ Siqueiros encouraged the artists to experiment with revolutionary materials such as enamel paint and spray guns in their artistic creations, and at the same time he introduced them to leftist politics. The students experimented with the new materials by depicting in posters and fresco paintings the aims of the CPUSA and portraits of its leader, Earl Browder. Siqueiros also worked with his students on political floats designed for May Day, which incorporated revolutionary techniques with a radical political content. Siqueiros’ first float represented the Popular Front Farmer-Labor Party in the May Day parade of 1936.

The float criticizes Wall Street's control of the United States' economic and political systems. It depicts Wall Street capitalism as a central figure that holds in his hands the emblems of the Republican and Democratic parties, symbolizing its power and control over them. The emblems in turn are surmounted by cutout figures of the opposite party, indicating the lack of differentiation between Republicans and Democrats. A gigantic moving hammer smashes the Wall Street figure, indicating the triumph of the

⁸⁵ Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralist in the United States*, 220.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

Communist Party.⁸⁷ The Workshop also did collective projects for the CPUSA, and even after Siqueiros left in 1937, a few workshop productions were created by the members, including the May Day 1937 float and a mural for the “Save Czechoslovakia Rally” in October, 1938.⁸⁸

American artists suffered from censorship, however, and this is probably the reason why so few American artists followed the Mexican muralists in expressing their principal beliefs through their art. Left-wing artists in America believed that it was more important to reach the public with their murals without any political approach that might have been regarded as propagandistic or, at worse, resulted in having their work cancelled.⁸⁹ The American artist did not have freedom of expression because “even symbolic treatments were usually rejected.”⁹⁰ Even the Director of the WPA, Holger Cahill, got in trouble. In 1935, the press accused him of being a Communist. The newspaper claimed that even while “. . . his primary interest has been art, he has been a familiar figure in Communist highbrow circles.”⁹¹ Audrey McMahon, the Director of the New York City FAP, commented that Congress was concerned that the Communist dominated WPA. She states the fact that some American artists liked and followed the socialist path led by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, all of whom “lent fuel to flame.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Ibid., 226-227.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 231.

⁸⁹ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas. Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 11.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁹¹ “Hopkins selects Communists as WPA Directors.” *The Awakened*, September 1, 1935.

⁹² O’Connor, *The New Deal. Anthology of Memoirs*, 74.

Indeed, she argues that there were “investigating committees” demanding to know the names of communist artists on the project and insisting that they be dismissed.⁹³

This is probably the reason why, despite the examples of the Mexican artists, most American muralists avoided the social protest and leftist ideas so often evident in the work of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, preferring instead to create scenes that affirmed American traditions and values or the promises of the New Deal.⁹⁴ A good example was the work of the American regionalist, Thomas Hart Benton.

José Clemente Orozco and Thomas Hart Benton worked together on the mural at the Architectural League and also at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1930. Benton commented in his autobiography that he admired Orozco’s work.⁹⁵ Their work at the New School showed Benton’s positive vision of modernity in contrast with the pessimistic view of Orozco. This contrast became more evident when Benton and Orozco chose the subject for their murals. On the one hand, Benton decided to paint the industrialization process in *America Today*, where the “. . . tremendous burst of human energy and mechanical power characterizes the present phase of economic life in America.”⁹⁶ Orozco, on the other hand decided to represent the “revolutionary unrest that smolders in the non-industrial periphery, India, Mexico, Russia.”⁹⁷

⁹³ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁴ Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, 161.

⁹⁵ Benton acknowledged in his autobiography that he became a member of the Delphic Gallery, founded by Alma Reed, because “Alma had the Mexican painter Clemente Orozco in town and because I had a great admiration for his work.” Alma Reed witnessed the successes of the Mexican mural movement and wanted to introduce Orozco to New York’s audience.

⁹⁶ O’Connor, *The New Deal. Anthology of Memoirs*, 74.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 74.

However the Left, who considered Benton's perceptions of modern industrial working conditions far from realistic and his art as "chauvinistic," strongly criticized his optimistic view.⁹⁸ Benton was in fact not interested in recording objective reality but his own perception of American life and labor. Benton's mural idealizes the possibilities of the American working class. He depicts black and white workers together, which Erika Doss describes as ". . . an unlikely scenario in the segregated construction industry of the thirties."⁹⁹

Benton explained in his autobiography that although he was a Marxist during the twenties, he was later disillusioned by the dictatorial regimen of Stalin. He decided that Marxism distorted reality and so he focused on positive aspects of American life. Critics understood and agreed with Benton's conception of American labor. The editor of *The Arts*, Lloyd Goodrich, explains that in Benton's mural there is no place for pessimism, but rather, the artist was able to depict a picture of the new industrialized world, in which man controls the machine. He explains that, ". . . there is no suggestion of the inhuman mechanized world pictured by so many artists."¹⁰⁰ Benton's art represented his conviction that American art should convey American meaning. Benton shows a specific concern with two particular issues that reflect the American image of the twentieth-century: race and industrialization. For this American artist, the idea was to integrate the minorities in order to secure a better future. Benton's positive position on social and labor response helped him to win other mural commissions throughout the Depression.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 86.

Through artists like Shahn and Zakheim we are able to perceive the situation that American artists experienced during the thirties, as well as the influence that the Mexican artists had not only on their artistic techniques but also on their political beliefs. Radical artists risked not only their prestige as artists, but also censorship of their art, and at times lost mural commissions because of their leftist ideas. Edward Bruce quotes from a letter that he received from the daughter of one of the artists:

I am only eleven, but I felt I must write this letter to you. My father used to work for the CWA art projects in San Francisco. He did a fresco in the Coit Tower. Now he is finished and I was wondering if there was another fresco he might do. He needs the money so badly. I have heard him say you were the originator of the CWA for the artists. His name is Bernard B. Zakheim.¹⁰¹

But Bruce did nothing to help her father, for despite the efforts of the Artists' Union, radical artists could not get federal support. The repression suffered by leftist artists put them in a desperate economic situation. In contrast, Benton's art and ideologies shows us an example of what the government wanted the people to see, because Benton was depicting a scene that, even if it did not reflect the American reality, was a positive view of the America that the government wanted to create.

¹⁰⁰ Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 88.

Chapter 4. The Mexican Influence on American Abstract Expressionists

During the thirties, as we have seen, the Mexican mural movement set the precedent for a public art in the United States. The influence of these artists took a completely different route during the following decade. Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros left the United States in the late thirties and by 1942 the New Deal was finished. The economic depression was over and the intervention of the United States during World War II made the country a super power. As part of the effort to project its power and ideologies, the United States started a period of “witch hunting,” persecuting artists and intellectuals believed to be communist.

The United States started to reject all manifestations of the previous historical period, including the artistic creations of the New Deal. In current art books, this period is still considered a “dark age” in the history of American art.¹⁰² Therefore, it is not strange that the subsequent artistic movement, Abstract Expressionism, established a rupture with American regionalism, social realism and, of course, the influence of Mexican art. The new generation of American artists believed that art should be apolitical. Mark Rothko, a member of the Abstract Expressionists, repudiated Marxist Social Realism, and

¹⁰¹ Quotation taken from Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in the New Deal Art*, 140.

¹⁰² Eva Cockcroft mentions in her essay, “Los Estados Unidos y el arte latinoamericano de compromiso social: 1920-1970” that by the mid 1950s, “the social realism of the 1930s was buried behind a wall of silence... History art books ignored the period of the 1930s.” 202.

protested against it. According to his brother-in-law, Howard Sachar, Rothko “. . . felt very strongly about art not being political.”¹⁰³

Even though most of the American artists (Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, William de Kooning) who participated in Abstract Expressionism used to work in the New Deal FAP, they decided to break in the 1940s with the artistic traditions of the old generation of American painters. Another reason that allowed the rupture to take place was that they did not believe in the nationalistic movement. As members of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, they declared themselves against the social and nationalistic art ". . . that denies the universal tradition, which is the basis of modern artistic movements."¹⁰⁴ American artists were also experiencing the influence of European art. The following drawing depicts the attitudes of the younger generation of American artists. In the right part of the mural, we can see that the Mexican influence (in the form of a heavy weight) hangs down from the tree of art on a breaking branch, literally a dead end. Names of artists such as Thomas Hart Benton lay on the ground in the form of ears of corn, which in turn suggest gravestones and the end of the Roosevelt era. American artists were looking again to Europe in order to find themselves. The roots of the tree belong to European artists of the nineteenth century: Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin and Van Gogh, who nurtured themselves with different artistic movements from the history of art, such as Negro sculpture, Japanese prints, primitive painting, even children's work. They also influenced three of the great artists of the twentieth century --

¹⁰³ James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko. A Biography* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 124.

¹⁰⁴ Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista*, 377.

Braque, Matisse and Picasso-- who were considered by American artists the models to follow in modern art.

Even though American artists and critics considered Abstract Expressionism to be a rupture with the Mexican style, several aspects of the Mexicans' work remain visible in the art of the American artists. Octavio Paz explains that even in the name of this new movement we find a “. . . transparent contradiction: on the one hand abstraction, on the other hand expression.”¹⁰⁵ Paz mentions that American artists were not interested in painting archetypes but rather emotions, which brought them closer to expressionism and to the art of Siqueiros and Orozco, which almost all the artists had experienced firsthand. Paz concludes by saying that “. . . the abstraction of North Americans came from Europe; but their expressionism came from Mexico.”¹⁰⁶ He believed that we find echoes of the Mexicans in the work of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell and Clifford Still: “. . . the taste for the brutal brush stroke, the violence of color, the shaded contrast, the ferocity.”¹⁰⁷ The artistic technique was one of several factors that influenced American Expressionism, while the themes and the change in the scale of painting, as we are about to see, helped to re-define the identity of American art. The Mexican presence is most visible in the work of Jackson Pollock who, to many, is the most representative of the group of American Expressionist artists.

Pollock received a strong influence in his art technique and themes from Orozco and Siqueiros. Pollock was deeply impressed by Orozco's famous *Prometheus* (Figure

¹⁰⁵ Octavio Paz, “Social Realism in Mexico: the Murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros,” *Artscanada*, 36 (Dec.-Jan. 1979-1980): 65.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

16); he cited this work for years as “. . . the greatest painting in the country.”¹⁰⁸ Orozco's *Prometheus* shows the Greek god who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind, thereby receiving punishment from Zeus. This expressive mural also represents the reaction of the people to fire. While some welcome it, others reject it, suggesting the experience of modern human development. According to Stephen Polcari, the use of classical myth was an excellent tool for the exploration of contemporary problems: "Orozco, and later Pollock, took on the role of a mythmaker reinventing allegorical symbols for the modern experience."¹⁰⁹

Pollock was not the only Abstract Expressionist artist who followed Orozco's path. Several artists (Rothko, Pollock, Gottlieb, and Newman) experienced a stage from 1942-1947, in which Rothko named them the "Mythmakers." These painters turned to ancient myths and primitive art for inspiration. They were trying to create a universal language and believed that myth, because of its content, was more appropriate than Social Realism or Regionalism. The Mythmakers looked at all kinds of primitive art, including Chinese, Egyptian, African, Early Christian, Pre-Columbian, ancient Greek, Northwest Coast Indian and even prehistoric art. In 1940, the Museum of Modern Art presented an exhibition called "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art," and the next year "Indian Art in the United States." Both exhibitions were considered by these artists to

¹⁰⁷ Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista*, 380.

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Polcari mentions that according to Pollock's close friend Reuben Kadish it was neither Siqueiros nor Rivera who most influenced Pollock. "The real man" he said, "is Orozco and his *Prometheus* at Pomona is the thing to look at." Stephen Polcari, "Orozco and Pollock: Epic Transfigurations" in *American Art*, 39.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

possess “the basic universality of all real art.”¹¹⁰ These exhibitions were also important for the artists because they showed them the native roots of American identity.

Another influence that Pollock had from Orozco was the use of dark colors and the anguished expressiveness of his drawing. Pollock’s *Woman*, of 1933, shows echoes of Orozco’s *Prometheus*. The painting also resembles Orozco’s work in its composition. The central figure is bigger and more expressive than the rest of the characters, all of whom appear naked. The central character, like Orozco’s Prometheus, avoids looking the audience in the eyes, even though she shows her body. Their faces look up and the expression of their bodies as well as the bodies among them reflects anguish and sadness.

Motherwell’s work also shows Mexican influence. He explained that his first experience as a serious painter occurred while he lived in Taxco, Mexico, where he started painting full time. “Though I was not at all influenced by pre-Columbian or Mexican high art, I was on the contrary profoundly influenced by the current folk art. . . and in which all colors I’ve named above (chalky white, black, yellow ochre, blue, vermilion) are dominant.”¹¹¹ However, not only color influenced the work of Motherwell, but also Mexican themes. Several of his works have titles that remind us of Mexico, for example: *Mexican Night*, *Mexican Window*, and his crucial work *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*. In this last work, Motherwell utilized pictures of Pancho Villa, on the left dead, on the right alive.

¹¹⁰ Irving Sandler, “Abstract Expressionism: The Noise of Traffic on the Way to Walden Pond,” in Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal, *American Art in the Twentieth Century. Painting and Sculpture 1913-1993* (Germany: Prestel, 1993), 79.

¹¹¹ H.H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrahams Inc, 1982), 182.

Another important influence that the Mexican artists had in the United States was with their technique. As we saw in Chapter 3, Pollock joined David Alfaro Siqueiros's experimental workshop, called "A Laboratory of Modern Techniques in Art," in 1936. Siqueiros's intention in the workshop was to translate his revolutionary ideas into a revolutionary art, coherent with the new era and new technologies. Therefore, the goal of the workshop was to experiment with new materials and techniques that were being used in the technology of the twentieth century.¹¹² The artists who participated in the workshop experimented with brushless methods of painting, such as spraying, pouring, and puddling, as well as with different kinds of non-traditional paints, such as industrial paints and silk-screen printing. Alex Horn, who also participated in the workshop, recalled, ". . . pouring, dripping, and splattering the paint on the panel place on the floor. . . the paint was poured directly form the can or dripped from a stick."¹¹³ This new technique was going to be Pollock's distinctive abstract style. Partly due to the influence of Siqueiros, in 1949 *Life Magazine* asked the question "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?"¹¹⁴ This title was referred to the opinion of Greenberg, who was an important art critic. The article contained mixed opinions, but as Kirk Varnedoe explains, being ". . . bannered by *Life* vaulted Pollock into a unique position among his peers."¹¹⁵

American painters experimented another important change during this period of time: monumental painting. Hilton Kramer mentions that the Mexican mural movement

¹¹² Varnedoe and Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* 26.

¹¹³ Stephen Polcari, "Orozco and Pollock: Epic Transfigurations," in *American Art*, 39.

¹¹⁴ *Life Magazine*, (August 8, 1949).

was the source of change in the scale of the masterpieces that characterized Abstract Expressionism.¹¹⁶ Without the example of the Mexicans, the American artists perhaps would have never changed the scale. This shift in their art dimensions created an affinity between Mexicans and Americans.

It is believed that Pollock may also have another debt to the Mexican artists Orozco and Rivera in the concept of the portable mural.¹¹⁷ Rivera seems to have been the first one to use the idea of movable panels in 1931, during his first one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. He made several large, movable frescoes, which required special preparation. Rivera used this technique to make more portable murals, in 1933, for the New Workers School “. . . and from then until the end of his career, almost all of his frescoes were painted on movable steel frameworks.”¹¹⁸

Orozco also explains that another option for mural painting is the construction of solid panels that can sometimes be more harmonious with the building. He mentions in the catalogue of his retrospective exhibition in El Palacio de Bellas Artes, in 1947, the technique of movable murals. His last work in the United States, *Dive Bomber and Tank* (1940), is representative of this technique. It consists of six interchangeable panels commissioned by the Aldrich Rockefeller fund and it is part of the Museum of Modern Art collection in New York. In an interview published in *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 1940, Orozco describes the techniques that he applied in his creation of

¹¹⁵ Varnedoe and Karmel, *Jackson Pollock*, 59.

¹¹⁶ Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista*, 380.

¹¹⁷ Polcari, *American Art*, 54.

¹¹⁸ Helms, *Diego Rivera. A Retrospective*, 331.

moveable panels.¹¹⁹ Pollock mentions in his Guggenheim application in 1947 his intention to create large paintings that would function as easel paintings as well as murals. His stated intention, however, was not exactly an original idea, because as we have seen, the Mexicans were already doing this, and most of Pollock's recognized portable murals were done during 1947-50.

Through these examples, we are able to see that although Abstract Expressionism was considered a break with the Mexican influence, it nonetheless retained several of its traditions. The artistic techniques, colors, themes, and scale are among the most representative characteristics of this new movement and they come directly from the example of the Mexican *maestros*. However, the leftist ideologies had disappeared due to the political situation that reigned in the United States during that time.

¹¹⁹ *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*. Vol. vii. (August 1940): 4.

CONCLUSION

Mexican mural painting most influenced American art during the decade of the 1930s. As we have seen, the Mexican mural movement set the precedent for a public art in the United States. In combination with the economical crisis, it led the artists to follow the Mexican path and paint social art. The presence of the Mexican artists in the United States produced a direct impact on American artists' art and techniques, for they could experience firsthand the work done by the Mexican *maestros* in their country and could also work with them as assistants. The influence that the Mexican mural Renaissance had in the United States can be seen in the thousands of murals created during the New Deal.

My objective has been to show that the American artists' rejection of European influence helped them look at a Mexican school that depicted social problems and political ideas. The radical politics of the Mexican artists succeeded in gaining followers all across the United States, because during the New Deal the American artists decided to follow not only the Mexicans' artistic techniques but also their Marxist ideology. As we have seen, Bernard Zakheim, Victor Arnautoff and Ben Shahn were among the artists who followed Rivera's style and created art with radical social content. Their murals created controversies and at times led to censorship.

This censorship was aggravated during the McCarthy era, wherein artists and intellectuals who were believed to be Communists were persecuted. This explains why the influence that the Mexican school had during the thirties has been often neglected.

Alicia Azuela also mentions that, “Se influyó sobre un país al que no le interesaba analizar y reconocer esa influencia porque la había englobado dentro de una etapa propia de su historia que en términos artísticos aun hoy se considera inferior y a niveles políticos censurable.”¹²⁰ Therefore it is not strange that the repercussion that their influence had is often ignored from modern American art books, which see the beginnings of modern American art in Abstract Expressionism. This style repudiated both Marxist Social Realism and nationalism, for these reasons it is believed by art historians to break with the Mexican influence. This thesis demonstrates that even though the Mexican’s leftist ideologies ceased to have much influence, their techniques and use of color persisted during the period of Abstract Expressionism.

The Mexican mural movement also contributed to a shift in the scale of American paintings. Hilton Kramer mentions that the Mexican mural movement was the source of change in the scale of the masterpieces that characterized abstract expressionism.¹²¹ Without the example of the Mexicans, American artists perhaps never would have changed the scale; this shift in their art dimensions created an affinity between Mexicans and Americans.

It is also interesting to discover in Octavio Paz’s reflections that “In Mexico the influence of muralism was tragic because instead of opening doors it closed them.

Muralism engendered a sect of academic and vociferous disciples. In the United States

¹²⁰ Alicia Azuela, “La presencia de Diego Rivera en los Estados Unidos: Dos versiones de la historia,” in *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* (México: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1991), 175. “We influenced a country that was not interested in analyzing and recognizing that influence, because it was included within a stage of their own history that is still today, in artistic terms, considered inferior and on political levels censurable.”

¹²¹ Octavio Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista*, 380.

the influence was beneficial: it opened the minds, sensibilities and eyes of the painters.”¹²² This final reflection opens several issues that still need to be studied. First what happened to mural painting in Mexico after the 1940s? We do know that Mexican artists continued to paint murals until their deaths, but did they have followers? Did their art continue to be radical? Also, we can ask ourselves the same question: What happened to mural painting in America after the 1940s? It is interesting to know that several groups, which were segregated during different periods of time, used mural painting, with its social tradition, to express the people’s desire for justice. The first group to arise was the black Americans, who, during the 1940s to 1960s, were fighting for their civil rights. Eva Cockcroft mentions that Rivera’s influence can be seen in black artists like Charles White, John Biggers and Hale Woodruff, during the 1950s.¹²³ However these murals were largely ignored. Another group that followed the Mexican mural influence was the Hispanic sector, particularly the Chicanos. They also used mural art to depict their struggles in American society. Cockcroft explains that Siqueiros influence was very important among the Chicanos, especially in California, Texas and New Mexico. According to her, Chicanos followed Siqueiros’ ideas of composition, perspective and space.¹²⁴ The Chicanos also showed their admiration of the Mexican artists by painting homages to them. The mural *Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros and Kahlo*, in a Chicano park in San Diego, California, represents and acknowledges the influence of

¹²² Paz, “ Social Realism in Mexico: The Murals of Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros,” 65

¹²³ Eva Cockcroft in *El espíritu latinoamericano: arte y artistas en los Estados Unidos, 1920-1970*. (New York: El Museo de Artes del Bronx and Harry N. Abrams, 1988),189.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

the Mexican muralists. It includes the faces of the Mexican *maestros*, as the artists who most influenced the American painting of the 1930s.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: Leticia Alvarez
Address: 508 Hunt Club Dr. Apt. 404
Blacksburg, VA, 24060
Phone: (540) 951-5656
Birthday: June 18, 1973
Civil Status: Married

STUDIES

Master in Arts in Latin American Studies
Virginia Tech (August 1999-May 2001)

Master in Arts, Major in Education
Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León
(January 1997- December 1998)

Bachelor Degree in Arts
Universidad de Monterrey
(August 1991- December 1995)

PROFESSIONAL WORK

Teacher of Spanish
Virginia Tech
(August 1999-May 2001)

Teacher of Art
Universidad de Monterrey
(August 1997-December 1998)

Teacher of Arts
San Patrick School
(September 1996- July 1997)

Conference presentations

History Conference, Virginia Tech
“The Influence of the Mexican Muralists in
the United States.”
March 2001

Honors and Awards

Teaching Assistanship, Virginia Tech
(August 1999-May 2001)